

GENDER EQUALITY: 40 Years On!

“SUIT HOUSEWIFE”



**An Overview of the Barbara Webster
Collection at the Arts Design and Media
Archive, Birmingham City University**

Introduction

"I think the problem is that men are not used to considering women's opinions and attitudes seriously. I really believe that we cannot go on wasting the talents and potential of women."

Trudy Livingstone
Chair of the Women's Committee

The Barbara Webster Collection highlights the work and activism of Birmingham based women in the mid-80s, and informs a research project funded by the British Academy / Leverhulme Small Grant Scheme. The exhibition Gender Equality: 40 years on! forms part of that research and was divided into six panels to illustrate women's contribution to addressing gender equality in Birmingham.

Arranged thematically, the six exhibition panels represented in this booklet include copies of materials from the Collection, newspaper cuttings, posters, leaflets, covers of zines and an article from Spare Rib.

The starting point for the exhibition is the Barbara Webster Collection which focuses on the Women's Committee, established by Birmingham's Labour Council (1984-87). In her Introduction to the collection, Barbara gives a detailed account of the Women's Committee, her role as head of the Women's Unit and key projects developed during her time. The exhibition and this booklet are informed by Barbara's introduction to the Collection (2023), which is available from the Arts, Design and Media Archives, at BCU.

The exhibition demonstrates the collaborative nature of the Women's Unit, reaching out to women across Birmingham's diverse communities, challenging stereotypes and celebrating the diverse experiences of Birmingham women. In addition, the panels draw attention to women's activism and creative endeavours, which contributed to fundamental changes for Birmingham. It is this legacy which the exhibition seeks to celebrate. As a research project, Gender Equality: 40 years on! invites us to reflect on gender equality now, by considering how past voices, campaigns and activism helps us challenge contemporary inequalities, in a city such as Birmingham.

The Women's Committee and the Women's Unit



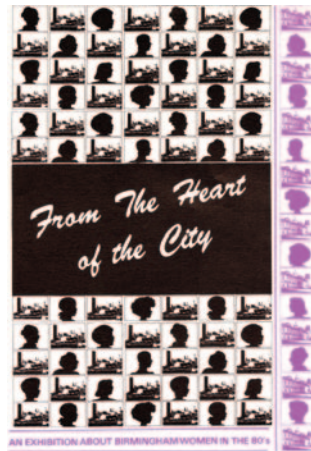
In May 1984, Birmingham's newly elected Labour Council established a Women's Committee as a full committee of the City Council. Its primary purpose was to consider the position of women in relation to all Council services and to strengthen the links between the Council and women in the community. The Women's Unit was established in November 1984, to support the Committee's work. Barbara Webster was appointed, initially part-time to the post of Head of the Women's Unit and Pam Dixon was the full time Policy and Research Officer. Eventually the team expanded to seven posts and together they shaped an ambitious programme of initiatives to address the complex social, political and economic inequalities which impacted the everyday lives of Birmingham women in the 80s.

An important early project was the photographic exhibition 'From the Heart

of the City' by Rhonda Wilson (1953-2014), commissioned in 1985, which represents the diverse lives and experiences of women in Birmingham. The leaflet displayed in this exhibition, illustrates the idea of showcasing 80 portraits of women in Birmingham, at every stage of their lives.

For those involved in the Women's Unit and the Committee, there were significant challenges exemplified in the press cuttings included in this panel. It was necessary to justify the Committee's work and the women involved experienced personal discrimination as they questioned the status quo and challenged stereotypes, as much within the City Council as through local media. As this exhibition shows, this did not faze them and their determination, often sustained through their collegiality, changed Birmingham's political, cultural and social landscape.

Three Key Projects: Low Pay Report, Women Celebrate Festival and the Getting Together Directory



The Women's Unit made many interventions but there were three key projects: the Low Pay report which informed the 'Worth Paying For' exhibition, the Women Celebrate festival, and Getting Together (a directory of women's groups). As the panel shows, the Women's Unit addressed a breadth of issues pertinent to women's equality, building connections across the city.

The Low Pay report was developed in response to the 1984 Equal Value amendment to the Equal Pay Act 1970. This enabled the comparison of pay rates, leading to the right to equal pay, if people were doing work of equal value. The themes and ideas in the report are illustrated in the 'Worth Paying For' posters, designed and produced by Rhonda Wilson. The Unit's work on Low Pay was controversial for Birmingham City Council because it turned the spotlight on employment and pay issues within the Council itself, revealing how many women employees were on low pay. As the report's researcher, Pam Dixon, remembers:

"I think what a lot of people hadn't grasped was the concept of indirect discrimination. That just wasn't on the agenda, and that was why it was so easy to find it, because people hadn't thought to hide it away. We asked for and received the information from the Personnel Department about manual workers' pay and as soon as I opened it, the inequalities in pay jumped out at me. It was shocking! It wasn't just the base pay rates but all the bonuses the men got on top, almost like bonuses for turning up to work. Cleaners and carers weren't even at the party when it came to bonuses. Reliability and conscientiousness were just expected from women."
Pam Dixon, 2024

Held for the first time in 1987, 'Women Celebrate' was a festival held around the time of International Women's Day (8th March) to celebrate all Birmingham women. The festival, co-ordinated by Emma Woolf, included 100s of events across the city which covered health, sport, film, arts, work, and leisure. The festival was thought to be a great success and continued for 10 years, until 1996. As the press clippings in this

panel show, despite its achievements there was always criticism from individuals and aspects of the media.

'Getting Together' was a directory of women's groups launched by the Women's Committee in March 1987. Pre-internet it was difficult for women to share experiences and information but the directory, which was available for free in libraries, adult education centres and neighbourhood offices, helped women to know what was going on across Birmingham. Sue Gorbing, Women's Information and Liaison Officer, remembers doing the research for the directory and she states:

"You go through telephone directories. You look at community organisations... go to the library, and gradually, started to try and build up a picture of what's around."
Sue Gorbing, 2024

Working with relatively few resources, the creation of a directory relied on building good connections across diverse communities to make impactful changes towards women's equality.

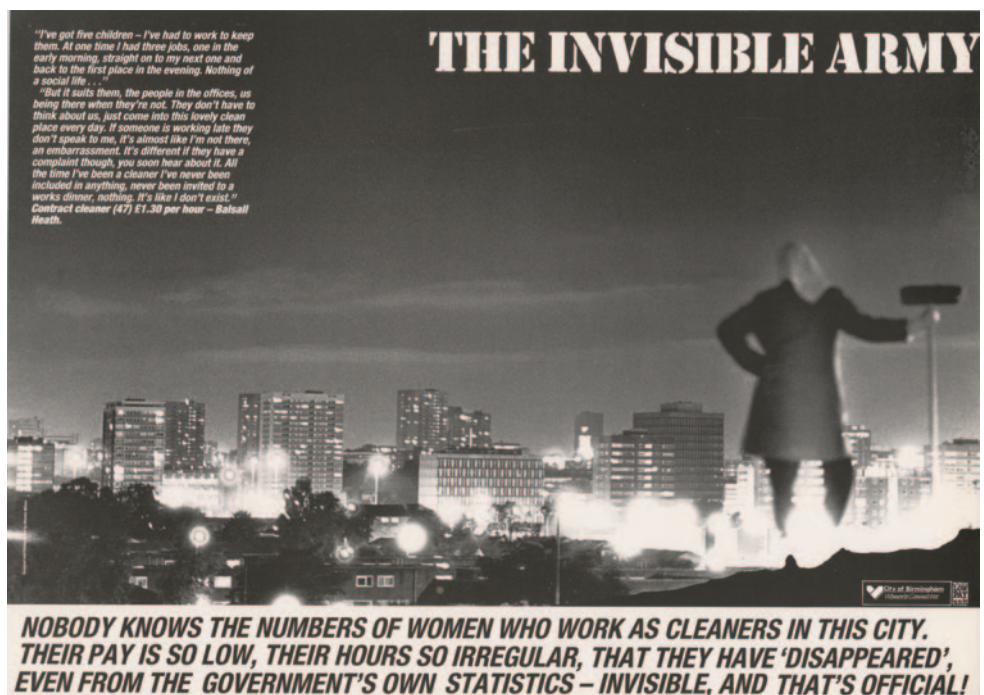
Creating the 'Worth Paying For' Posters

The posters for the 'Worth Paying For' exhibition were commissioned by the Committee to highlight key issues around low pay for women. It consisted of 15 panels of witty and impactful photographs produced as posters to circulate to local libraries, community centres, and on loan for organisations, schools, colleges to stimulate debate. The posters created an exhibition which highlighted areas traditionally regarded as 'women's work' such as hairdressing, cleaning, catering, supermarket cashier, usually part time work, as women were responsible for the home, childcare and dependants. The accompanying leaflets highlight the issues and set out what a woman in low paid work could do about it.

Wilson's constructed documentary style of photography presents an opportunity to reframe the participants, involving them as collaborators into the co-creation of the images. Despite depicting issues of low pay, the women represented in the images have agency and are given a voice rather than being depicted as oppressed subjects. The posters combine clever designs, exemplified in 'Miss Badly Paid' which mimics a beauty contest, with the hard-hitting fact that hairdressing, waitressing and barmaid were the worst paid jobs.

We also include part of an article authored by Wilson and published in the influential photography magazine *Ten.8*, in 1987 (issue number 26) published in Birmingham. Wilson describes her motivation and the experiences which lead to producing the 'Worth Paying For' images for the poster campaign.

After being nominated for a Sun Life Photographic Award, an exhibition of the posters was displayed at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford and formed part of the first British Photographic Biennale.



ONLY PAID



"Generally speaking, people undervalue what's involved in hairdressing. They say 'Oh it's only a trim isn't it - that can't take much.' They forget it takes up to five years to train. And we enable men and women to go out there and feel confident about their appearance. It helps them get on in the world." Hairdresser (44) Moseley

City of Birmingham Women's Council

Rhonda Wilson discusses the people and practices which influenced her visual politics, leading to an exhibition on low pay which combines ideology with popular culture.

PICTURES for POLITICS and PLEASURE

1978 Jackie

ANOTHER LIFE

Ten years ago, with a different consciousness, I worked as a writer on teenage magazines. Hidden behind a male pseudonym, I presented the pop page for Jackie and answered problem page letters from young women who thought their lives were over because they didn't have a boyfriend. Or (according to the gospel of the men in the management) they had 'boof' eyes, hair and figures. It was a schizophrenic existence — creating a market by appealing to fantasy and setting women against one another, then stepping up the damage.

We — the young journalists — were encouraged to be 'creative' and ambitious, within the rigid moral boundaries set by our employers. Step over the line, criticise the approach, argue with the editor and you would find yourself moved very quickly to a position in some lower rank — your seat instantly occupied by another young hopeful anxious to move on up. We were constantly played off against one another, never encouraged to share resources or discuss what we were doing. Constantly we were reminded about how lucky we were to have such an opportunity. What was worse, we believed it — some of us did, for a while, anyway.

One of the advantages I discovered about being unpopular was that I was constantly moved around, and thus the chances of gaining experience in different aspects of the magazine world became a reality. From the gossipping spot onto

'writing' the horoscopes, through asking Bob Geldof why he hated Mondays, into the fashion photography studios of London. 'Smile please, one more time' — and then back to the letters page, subbing the religious corner, my first published picture (of Alan Longhair from the Bay City Rollers, on a trampoline in his farm garden), and yet more letters. Then one day: 'Someone's off ill. Will you go to London and put together some covers?'

I told myself I had 'arrived' — a shooting schedule clutched in my hand and some ideas about what sorts of images I thought young women needed to see on the front of their magazines. For the first time I was working with a woman photographer who was sympathetic about presenting young women in a 'positive light', by which I then meant looking strong, being active. Midge Ure came along to be a 'prop', refused the chaises offered to him and played himself. It was something like a big party, we had a lot of fun and worked hard. I heard what it was like to be sixteen and travel down from Manchester for a day's modelling work, getting on the train with rollers in and stepping off as the girl who has everything going for her. As she said to me 'I need to take advantage — ten years and I'll be past it.'

For me the week was intense, three days going round finding clothes, props and models, two days in the studio and a mad panic at the end to get everything back before catching the last train north. I became fascinated by the mechanics

TEN.8



SIGN LANGUAGE

Rhonda Wilson
Benton Watney
Victor Burgin
Allen Bakula

PLUS

beginning to train...
land. Years encompassing returning from the north to the city of my childhood, fugitives from the experiences of the teenage magazine world fuelling my anger. I took some hesitant steps into Birmingham Women's Paper — keeping quiet about my background, trying to turn experiences around, using it for, not against us.

Somewhere in those years I began making pictures myself, encouraged by other women, who, in the late 70s and early 80s, believed that it was up to us to represent ourselves, be it in words, images, performance, music — whatever. Our aims were common: to learn together and share our skills.

For me this was a totally new approach. I became immersed in the paper and its production. We were all so enthusiastic — if we needed money for the print bill we would just 'have a jumble sale'. But soon it became apparent, as with other projects in the city, that to have no money meant to have no real time. And as women, without time to develop our futures, we had no power, no say. Our voluntary efforts could feed only our souls.

Birmingham Women's Paper, *Justis*, became our forum for debate, around issues such as low pay, childcare, representation. Different groups of women formed and broke up, all working together to create new ways forward. I was still struggling to find a window on the world: I was confused by the huge dilemmas presented by feminism. Where did I fit


and United States. Monica Barrow has been involved with the Women's Newsletter Group, which rotated production of a newsletter around various groups. When that folded, there had been avid discussion around the need for a more stable, more popular-style paper for women which would 'reach out to women not in the Women's Movement'. Thus, *Justis* had begun.

With the question of representation so high on the agenda it was a stimulating time for women interested in making pictures.

Anyone who was interested in photography in the Midlands was talking about the Handsworth Self Portrait, a project set up outside the Sadler's office in Grove Lane, where Derek Bishon, Brian Bomer and John Beardon were experimenting with a backdrop in the street and camera with cable release. They had taken around 600 pictures, most of the people photographed had been given a print, and issue No 3 of a magazine called *Ten.8*, which I'd never heard of, contained all the inside information. Still, if it was possible to do it, then we could do too. We applied for money to West Midlands Arts for a Women's Self Portrait.

Two months later, I was on the bus to Handsworth, going for my interview with the wide boys in Grove Lane. By some strange and fated path I had arrived there one day to deliver some printing and left with the offer of a job. My

ROUGH JUSTICE



"People aren't used to seeing professional black women - it comes as a shock that they can be other than cleaners or auxiliaries, which is the way most people think about us, if they think about us at all."

"Most women entering professions are confronted with discrimination of one form or another for the simple fact that they are women. Black women are confronted with the added discrimination associated with colour."

"I remember going to Court outside the Birmingham area. I made my way towards seats reserved for Lawyers, and felt and saw the glares from the Magistrates, Clerks, Ushers and other Lawyers, each wondering whose duty it was to direct me to the seats reserved for defendants. I occupied my seat in the Lawyer's enclosures and proceeded to prepare my case. I sat bemused as they presumably wondered 'where the hell did she come from?'"

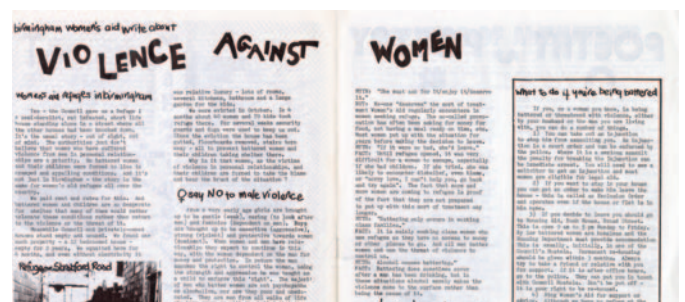
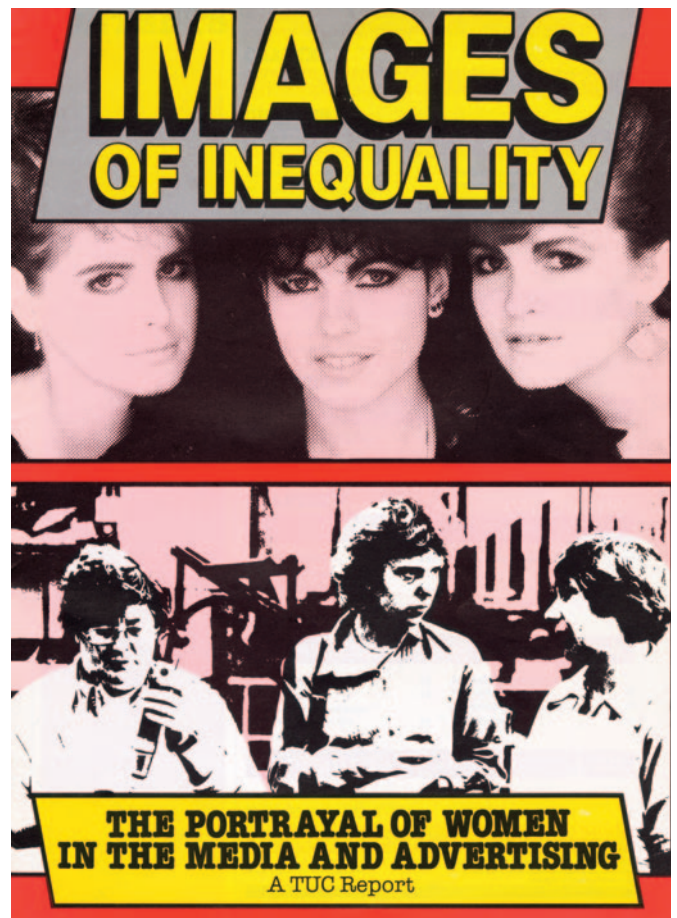
"The way to deal with discrimination is to have as much contempt for those guilty of it, as they have for you."

Lawyer, Handsworth.

BLACK AND ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN ARE CONCENTRATED IN LOW GRADE, LOW STATUS AND LOW PAID JOBS SUCH AS TEXTILES, HOSPITALS, SHOPS AND CATERING. IN THE 1950'S, MEN AND WOMEN FROM THE WEST INDIES, NEW COMMONWEALTH AND PAKISTAN WERE INVITED TO BRITAIN BY THE GOVERNMENT TO TAKE UP JOBS WHITE PEOPLE WERE NOT PREPARED TO DO. RACIAL DISCRIMINATION HAS MEANT THAT THE VAST MAJORITY OF AFRO CARIBBEAN AND ASIAN WOMEN REMAIN IN LOW PAID, LOW STATUS JOBS.

City of Birmingham Women's Council

Media, Arts Activism, and Political Publications



The work of the Women's Committee and of the Women's Unit did not come out of a vacuum. By the end of the 1970s, there was an appetite for change and in Birmingham, feminists, artists and the Women's Liberation Movement were actively challenging conventions and the role of women in society.

Artists, creative collectives and community organisations played an important role in addressing social and political concerns by using photography, zines, music and other creative forms to express their discontent. Often produced through collectives rather than

individual artists, this panel presents a range of material from Birmingham sub-cultural scenes. The zines, with their DIY-style, suggest they were easy to produce and distribute. The subjects are often hard hitting such as rape and violence against women, but they also suggest strong bonds between women. What is distinctive and important about local cultural artefacts is that they explore the issues pertinent to Birmingham communities.

The Barbara Webster Collection includes publications such as EveryWoman, Labour Party and Trade

Union pamphlets which provide useful context for understanding the issues of the time, beyond Birmingham. For instance, the TUC Report published in 1988 and presented in this panel, highlights debates about women in the media, challenging stereotypes and the ways in which women were objectified in the media.

In their different ways, from DIY zines to glossy magazines, the artefacts in this panel indicate the nature of the debates and the interventions made through a range of publications including artistic work.

The Closure of the Women's Committee

10 Daily News, Thursday, February 11, 1988

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SUN 14th FEB 10-4
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Unit head quits after advancing female rights
Talented Barbara's battle for women

A Birmingham's second Women's Festival draws its close, one of its main features - a series of negotiations and energy with step-down from her back of advancing women's rights throughout the city. When Barbara Webster first took on the post of head of the council's newly-created women's unit three years ago she - and the unit - were viewed with mixed feelings.

Some of those attitudes still remain, but the majority of the positive which she has brought to the council has already benefited the city's women.

The chief of the majority view was the work she has done to get the city's women's unit to work with the women's unit in the city. She has done this by setting up a series of working parties to deal with the issues of women's rights in the city. She has also set up a series of working parties to deal with the issues of women's rights in the city.

Barbara came to the post, at first as a second-in-command to the council's first women's officer, and in a relatively short time she had a reputation for her energy, drive, and determination to see the issues of women's rights through to the end.

There was a lot of uncertainty about her role when she first took on the post, but she has shown that she is not only a talented negotiator but also a determined and energetic leader.

Her departure from the council has been a significant loss to the women's unit and the city. Her energy and determination to see the issues of women's rights through to the end will be missed.

Barbara Webster has won the hearts of women and their minds throughout the city.

by LOUISE MATTHEWS

The women's unit has been a success story since its creation in 1985. It has been a success story because it has been able to bring together women from all over the city and to give them a voice. It has been a success story because it has been able to bring together women from all over the city and to give them a voice.

The first thing that Barbara did when she took over the unit was to set up a series of working parties. These working parties were set up to deal with the issues of women's rights in the city. They were set up to deal with the issues of women's rights in the city.

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N e w s S p e c i a l

BIRMINGHAM WOMEN'S COMMITTEE SCRAPPED

As we go to press the future of the Birmingham Women's Committee is in limbo. A campaign to save the Committee has been launched by 'Women Matter'. They explain

The City of Birmingham Women's Committee was set up in May 1984 to honour a Labour Party Manifesto commitment. Its delegations were to ensure that the needs and interests of women working for the largest local authority in England, as well as those of the women of Birmingham were met. The Committee was to advise on and develop a proper equal opportunities policy. Exactly three years later, the Women's Committee along with the Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee have been scrapped.

The intention is to enlarge the delegations of the City's Personnel Committee turning it into the Personnel and Equal Opportunities Committee. The officers of the women's and the Race Relations Units would be absorbed into the City Personnel Department - this removes them from direct contact with local politicians and chops their community liaison role. The new Personnel and Equal Opportunities Committee comprises fourteen men and two women - both the chair and vice chair are men. The white male head of the city's Personnel Department now has enhanced career prospects as he takes on equal opportunities and is likely to get a regrading. As the right wing leader of the council said when he made the proposal to abolish: "the ground work has been done".

Originally the Women's Committee had control over its budget of approximately £70,000 per year for training initiatives and £24,000 for

promotional work, besides the running costs of the Unit. This represented 0.02% of the total council budget.

Last year an attempt was made to wrest the training and promotions budget from the Women's Committee and also budgets belonging to the Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee. Truly Livingstone, the chair of the Women's Committee fought hard for the Units to retain control of their own budgets and succeeded in at least having those monies 'earmarked' for the sole use of the respective Units. At the same time the post of Women's Career Development Officer was taken from the Women's Unit and put on the books of the City Personnel Department - the writing was on the wall.

Although the Women's Committee has been a full Committee of the Council, it was given only an advisory brief. It reported directly to the council twice a year - it was due to report last week but not allowed to.

Within the last two years the Women's Committee has put women's issues on the agenda and made the various departments of the Council take the needs of women seriously for the first time. More specifically, it has initiated a positive action Training Programme. The Council is the largest employer in the city and has 50,000 staff 60% of those are women who are concentrated in the lowest paid and lowest status jobs. Women only and Black women only training has been set up under this initiative, enabling confidence building and progression within the council. Ironically, one of the first things that the Women's Committee achieved was the right for employees to five days paternity leave, and in response to local demands also fought for adaptive leave for sole parents.

12

Barbara Webster

Truly Livingstone

11

10

"COMMENT"

"White, male" backlash

Targeting women as "loonies," and women's committees as "extremist feminists," is going to backfire in a big way. This is the message coming from some very angry women in Birmingham, and others all round the country, to Birmingham City Council's right-wing Labour leader, Cllr Richard Knowles, who has managed to persuade the largest local authority in England and Wales to abolish its Women's Committee and dump the three leading women on the Council. They are Theresa Stewart, Chair of Social Services; Lynne Jones, Chair of

Nottingham, whose committee's future is seen as "uncertain"; and Newham in East London, where women are "worried" about the situation.

The Labour Party nationally, and Neil Kinnock in particular, have come round to a realisation that women's votes could be the key to their revival. But many of the party's men in local government have not got the message and are leaping off in the opposite direction.

It is not that women's committees have been solving all women's problems or represent the answer, by



In 1987, the Women's Committee, along with the Race Relations and Equal Opportunities Committee were replaced by a combined Personnel and Equal Opportunities Committee.


In her Introduction accompanying the collection, Barbara states that: *"there was a lot of opposition to the changes and in particular the abolition of the Women's and Race Relations Committees. On the day that the Council was meeting to confirm the Committee arrangements for the year, there was a demonstration of some 300 people outside the Council House calling for them to be re-instated. Many letters were written to the Leader of the Council and in support of the Women's Unit and its work."*

Barbara Webster, 2023

About Gender Equality: 40 Years on!

ONLY 8% OF GIRLS ENTER OCCUPATIONS WITH ANY FORMAL TRAINING SUCH AS DAY RELEASE OR FULL TIME OFF THE JOB TRAINING.

JOBS FOR THE GIRLS



"I did mention to my boss that my money was low and she said it was because I was training. When the works manager is absent or out to lunch, I have to correct the colours that are being produced in the factory. If I am in training, should I be given this responsibility?" Plastics colourant (17) Take home pay £48.66.

"My work mate was away for a month with shingles. So I was expected to run a 36 bedroomed hotel with just the help of a YTS girl. She should have been an extra but instead she was bogged down with work." Chambermaid (17) Take home pay £36.49 – Solihull.

City of Birmingham
© Birmingham Council 2017

The Barbara Webster collection and the exhibition recognise the important contributions to gender equality made by women working in Birmingham during the mid-80s. By collaborating, challenging stereotypes and social norms, these women forged a way forward for the values of the women's liberation movement and social justice.

The Collection

To access the Barbara Webster Collection and obtain a copy of her Introduction, Birmingham Women's Committee in the 1980s, contact the Arts, Design and Media Archive ADM-Archives-Request@bcu.ac.uk

The Research Project

To find out more about the Gender Equality: 40 years on! research project, contact Dr Annette Naudin annette.naudin@bcu.ac.uk.

Acknowledgements

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